"MAKING A NEW WORK": MELVILLE, BRITTEN, AND *BILLY BUDD*

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Herman Melville's short novel *Billy Budd, Sailor* ends with a three-chapter coda, a sequel of concluding commentary which takes the story from the closed world of the man-of-war HMS *Bellipotent* and briefly shows its evolution from naval drama through news account to legend. The first of these chapters tells the fate of Captain Vere whose dying words, the murmured "Billy Budd, Billy Budd," mystically invoke the handsome sailor.[1] The second chapter quotes from an official naval chronicle describing "a deplorable occurrence" on board the *Bellipotent* in which John Claggart "was vindictively stabbed to the heart by the suddenly drawn sheath knife of Budd." It concludes, "the criminal paid the penalty of his crime. The promptitude of the punishment has proved salutary. Nothing amiss is now apprehended aboard HMS *Bellipotent*" (130–131). The third chapter, the last in the book, tells how the story of Billy Budd enters folklore. Billy becomes a legendary figure among the sailors and the spar from which he was hanged takes on the significance of the Cross. The chapter closes with "Billy in the Darbies," a ballad written by one of Billy's former mates and "rudely published at Portsmouth" (131) describing Billy's last thoughts as dawn and his execution approach.

But while the book ends at the bottom of the ocean with Billy's line, "I am sleepy, and the oozy weeds about me twist" (132), the evolutionary process described in the last chapters which ultimately mythologizes the story has continued to the present day. Every

[1] Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative)*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 129. All quotations from Melville's *Billy Budd* come from this edition. Page numbers are in parentheses.

retelling whether critical, creative, or creatively critical presents another version of the tale and adds to the Billy Budd mythology. Melville invites this response to the story when he claims at the end of the novel that "truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges; hence the conclusion of such a narration is apt to be less finished than an architectural finial" (128).

Among the various full-blown interpretations of Melville's *Billy Budd*, including a play, a film, and two operas, Benjamin Britten's opera, with a libretto by E. M. Forster and Eric Crozier, stands out. First performed in 1951 in a four act version and revised in 1961 to two acts, Britten's *Billy Budd* has received increasing attention over the past few years and is now generally recognized as his most powerful opera. This essay will examine the relationship between the written source and Britten's performance version of *Billy Budd.* The objective is through a comparative analysis to understand how the different guiding personalities involved approached their work, and how the story is changed in its transformation from novel to opera.

Novel

Billy Budd is the final product of Melville's genius. *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847), his first seafaring novels won him a large enthusiastic audience, but as the rhetorical and metaphysical complexities of Melville's work grew, culminating in *Moby Dick* (1851), the public gradually abandoned him. At his death in 1891 the *Billy Budd* manuscript was left in a tin bread-box where it remained until 1924 when, during the Melville revival, Raymond Weaver transcribed and edited it for publication. Weaver's edition contained major flaws, including the printing of a discarded fragment of a late chapter as a preface, and it was only in 1962 that a reliable version of *Billy Budd* appeared edited by Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, Jr. Despite the text's checkered history, from it's first publication critics have almost universally hailed *Billy Budd* as a masterpiece.

Melville's tale is a dense lyrical meditation on the extremes of human character—on the conflict between unaffected goodness and

beauty and the calculating destructiveness of evil—and on the nature of authority. To dramatize his meditation, Melville supplies a stark plot that binds the three main figures together in a life and death struggle; and as a setting for the struggle he provides a ship-as-microcosm, a metaphor for the world. To briefly summarize the tale, innocent and good-hearted Billy Budd is impressed from the merchantman *Rights of Man* to serve on the HMS *Bellipotent.* As captain of the foretop, he is unjustly accused of intention to mutiny by John Claggart, the malevolent master-at-arms. Brought before Captain Vere, Billy, who under stress suffers from a stammer, is unable to explain his innocence. In frustration he strikes out at his accuser, killing him with a single blow. Vere, though personally drawn to Billy, realizes that according to naval law and to preserve order the sailor must hang. But while the plot is easily told, the richness of *Billy Budd* defies simple summary. Melville's novel is not essentially about action, rather, it is about Billy Budd, John Claggart, and Captain Vere. Each of these figures is important more for the nature of his character than for what he does.

Who is Billy Budd? In Chapter 1, Melville introduces the prototype of the Handsome Sailor whose combination of good looks, masculine charm, physical strength, and amiability make him popular wherever he goes. "Such a cynosure," the narrator tells us, "at least in aspect, and something such too in nature, though with important variations... was welkin-eyed Billy Budd—Baby Budd as more familiarly... he at last came to be called" (44). Blond and aged twenty-one, Billy Budd is, as his surname suggests, waiting to blossom. He is the essence of youthful potential. When Billy is gang-pressed to serve on the *Bellipotent*, the captain of the merchantman complains, "you are going to take my peacemaker" (46). " 'Well, blessed are the peacemakers,' " the lieutenant replies, " 'especially the fighting peacemakers.... But where's my beauty? Ah, here he comes; and, by Jove, lugging along his chest—Apollo with his portmanteau!" (48). On board the *Bellipotent*, Melville describes Billy as "a rustic beauty transplanted from the provinces and brought into competition with the highborn

dames of the court" (51). The narrator hints at a background to bring credibility to Billy's physical perfection and moral sweetness:

> Cast in a mold peculiar to the finest physical examples of those Englishmen in whom the Saxon strain would seem not at all to partake of any Norman or other admixture, he showed in face that humane look of reposeful good nature which the Greek sculptor in some instances gave to his heroic strong man, Hercules. But this again was subtly modified by another and pervasive quality. The ear, small and shapely, the arch of the foot, the curve in mouth and nostril, even the indurated hand dyed to the orange-tawny of the toucan's bill, a hand telling alike of the halyards and the tar bucket; but, above all, something in the mobile expression, and every chance attitude and movement, something suggestive of a mother eminently favored by Love and the Graces; all this strangely indicated a lineage in direct contradiction to his lot. (51)

When questioned about his family and place of birth, Billy replies, "'God knows, sir.'" Billy, in fact, is an illiterate orphan dropped by fate on board a British man-of-war. His only flaw is the one mentioned: "under sudden provocation of strong heart-feeling his voice, otherwise singularly musical, as if expressive of the harmony within, was apt to develop an organic hesitancy, in fact more or less of a stutter or even worse" (53).

John Claggart is Billy Budd's reverse image. He possesses "the mania of an evil nature, not engendered by vicious training or corrupting books or licentious living, but born with him and innate, in short 'a depravity according to nature'" (76). Physically, he is about thirty-five, spare and tall with black hair and skin the color of old marble. His chin is "cleanly cut as those on a Greek medallion" (64), and his eyes, appropriate to his position as disciplinarian with rattan in hand, "cast a tutoring glance" (64). His brow is "of the sort phrenologically associated with more than average intellect" (64). His general aspect and manner, including a slight foreign accent, suggest "a man of high quality, social and moral, who for reasons of his own was keeping incog" (64). Like Billy, he has no known past. His mysterious background is the subject of unfavorable speculation among the sailors. Like Billy also, he possesses an inner strength, "though from a different source" (77). Claggart's "constitutional sobriety, an in-

gratiating deference to superiors, together with a peculiar ferreting genius" (67) make him the perfect choice for ship's policeman. Claggart's hostility toward Billy seems unaccountable and virtually uncontrollable:

> With no power to annul the elemental evil in him, though readily enough he could hide it; apprehending the good, but powerless to be it; a nature like Claggart's, surcharged with energy as such natures almost invariably are, what recourse is left to it but to recoil upon itself and, like the scorpion for which the Creator alone is responsible, act out to the end the part allotted it. (78)

The third character, Captain Vere, is the most opaque and critically the most controversial. Both Billy and Claggart are familiar types known from Melville's earlier work. Claggart, especially, is foreshadowed by Jackson in *Redburn* (1849) and the ironically named Bland, a villainous master-at-arms in *White-Jacket* (1850). Captain Vere, however, is something new. Unlike Billy and Claggart who remain fairly static, Vere's consciousness grows over the course of the novel. In their introduction to *Billy Budd*, Harrison and Hayford show that Melville focused on Vere in the final shaping of the manuscript. Until Melville's final reworking of the text, only a few pages stood between the killing of Claggart and the closing ballad. In developing Vere in the trial scene, Melville deepened the novel's moral texture and turned a spare conflict between good and evil into an ethical problem on the nature of authority.

Captain Edward Fairfax Vere, a bachelor about forty years old, is "a sailor of distinction, even in a time prolific of renowned seamen" who has served in various engagements, "always acquitting himself as an officer mindful of the welfare of his men, but never tolerating an infraction of discipline" (60). He has "a marked leaning toward everything intellectual," never going to sea without a replenished library, "compact, but of the best" (62). Though practical, he occasionally exhibits a "certain dreaminess of mood. Standing alone on the weather side of the quarter-deck, one hand holding by the rigging, he would absently gaze off at the blank sea" (61). Because of this

occasional dreaminess, among his men he is known as "Starry Vere," an appellation, the narrator tells us, originating in Andrew Marvell's poem "Upon Appleton House":

> This 'tis to have been from the first
> In a domestic heaven nursed,
> Under the discipline severe
> Of Fairfax and the starry Vere. (61)

In the poem, "Fairfax" is Lord General Thomas Fairfax, commander from 1645 to 1650 of the triumphant Puritan army, and owner of Appleton House; "starry Vere" is Lady Ann Vere Fairfax, his strong-minded wife. Referring to Captain Vere as Starry Vere highlights his illustrious relations and also, perhaps more importantly, specifically emphasizes the feminine aspect, the more human, non-naval aspect, of Vere's personality. It is largely because of Vere's double nature—part Captain Vere and part Starry Vere—that his character is so intriguing. Vere's role is pivotal; he is the balance between Billy and Claggart, yet in crucial ways he himself is split.

Billy Budd's subtitle, (*An Inside Narrative*), immediately adds a note of mystery to the narrator and uncertainty to the text. It suggests both a tale based on objective first-hand experience of life at sea, and on subjective knowledge of the inner life of the men who go to sea. But why is the subtitle in parentheses, almost whispered? Does the narrator have something at stake in the story? The point of view in the novel is omniscient, shifting from character to character, carefully revealing or withholding information, creating an atmosphere rife with ambiguity. Melville relished ambiguity and consciously cultivated it in his later novels. In *Moby Dick* his distrust of finality and attraction to multiple, layered meaning is clearly stated: "God keep me from completing anything," the narrator announces. "This whole book is but a draught—nay, but the draught of a draught."[2] *Pierre, or The Ambiguities*, published in 1852 a year after *Moby Dick*, faithfully lives up to its subtitle; Melville obscures nearly every aspect of the tale's main

[2] Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (New York: Hendricks House, 1952), 142.

thread with stylistic eccentricities and narrative digressions. In *Billy Budd*, an important example of Melville's love of ambiguity comes when the reader, after having witnessed Claggart's plot against Billy, his murder by Billy, and the arguments of the drumhead court, is suddenly shut out from Captain Vere's private interview with Billy during which Billy is informed of his death sentence. This omission, a narrative stutter equivalent to Billy's vocal stutter, creates an emptiness, an inconclusiveness, at the exact point where the depth of the relationship between Vere and Billy might naturally be fully exposed.

Hershel Parker's recent *Reading 'Billy Budd'* emphasizes that the complexity of *Billy Budd* and the enormous amount of polarized criticism it has generated are in part the result of the way the book was written and the fact that it is unfinished.[3] Melville's novel was essentially composed backwards. The prose text grew from a headnote to the poem, "Billy in the Darbies" which was probably originally written around 1886 and intended to be published in his volume of poetry, *John Marr and Other Sailors, With Some Sea-Pieces* (1888). Over the years Melville worked on and expanded the note, focusing first on one character and then another. At his death the novel had not been weeded of narrative inconsistencies and had not received a final polishing. Any understanding of *Billy Budd*, Parker argues, any attempt to sort out its ambiguities, must take into account the manuscript's evolution and unfinished state.

One might think that an unfinished novel by an author known for intentional obscurity would keep the critics at bay. In fact, in the case of *Billy Budd*, the opposite has proved true. Critics love last short masterpieces and they value them even more when textual problems and obscurities provoke rather than confuse. Critics of *Billy Budd* have generally viewed the novel as Melville's last will and testament, though they have failed to agree on what the testament says. Over the years, two rival critical camps have emerged, one viewing the book, in

[3] Hershel Parker, *Reading 'Billy Budd'* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1990). After years of polarized interpretations of *Billy Budd*, this is a model of balanced, provocative scholarship rooted firmly in the text.

E. L. Grant Watson's words, as a "testament of acceptance" and the other seeing it as a "testament of resistance."[4] Acceptance critics interpret the novel as Melville's final word on his quarrel with the universe. *Moby Dick*, they claim, is a tormented search for answers to the problems of life which comes up empty-handed; *Billy Budd* contains an older, wiser, humbler author's recognition that however tragically the contradictory aspects of life may manifest themselves, they are simply part of the cosmic order. The Christian symbolism appearing throughout the book and culminating in the hanging scene indicates Melville's final acceptance of Christian redemption. Resistance critics, taking their instructions from the New Criticism of the 1950s, see no old age conversion. For them Melville's questioning has added power over *Moby Dick* and the earlier novels because in *Billy Budd* he resorts to bitter irony. In their view a close reading of *Billy Budd* reveals it as an ironic, antireligious, rebellious statement on the repressive structure of the universe. Billy's execution is an example of social injustice carried out under Captain Vere's reactionary authority. While most readers lean toward the testament of acceptance interpretation of critics who argue for social expediency, nearly everyone feels a sense of outrage and horror at the injustice of Billy's hanging. Indeed, in the climactic scene where, as the noose is tightened around Billy's neck, he cries out, "God bless Captain Vere!" (123) Melville's artistry takes over and the critical debate seems for an instant somehow irrelevant.

Opera

Composers have frequently mined works of literature for their operas. The plots of the most famous operas, from Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, to Wagner's Ring Cycle, to Pucinni's *Madame Butterfly* are drawn from literary texts. Great literature, however, does not guarantee great opera. For a literary work to be successfully

[4] E. L. Grant Watson, "Melville's Testament of Acceptance," in *Critical Essays on Melville's Billy Budd, Sailor*, Robert Milder, ed., (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1989), 41–45.

transformed into opera it must be suited to the sensibility and musical personality of the composer. An example can be found in two operatic versions of Shakespeare's *Othello*, one by Rossini and the other by Verdi. Byron wrote that Rossini's attempt was "lugubrious" and "the greatest nonsense".[5] Verdi's *Otello*, by contrast, has been called "surely the greatest Italian tragic opera—and perhaps the greatest of all."[6] Much of the difference between these two versions lies in the different artistic temperaments of the composers involved. Rossini, whose *Otello* was first performed in 1816, the same year as his comic masterpiece, *The Barber of Seville*, was unable at that time to infuse his work with the necessary seriousness. Verdi wrote his *Otello* in his last years. Looking through the lens of experience and old age, he understood the tragic dimensions of Shakespeare's play and translated it into magnificent music.

Among post World War II composers of opera, Benjamin Britten has emerged as virtually the only one whose work holds a secure place in the repertory. Literary texts—poetry, fiction, and drama—by George Crabbe, Guy de Maupassant, Herman Melville, Henry James, William Shakespeare, and Thomas Mann provide the framework for all of Britten's operas. On the surface Melville's *Billy Budd* does not seem an obvious choice for an opera. When it was learned that Britten was working on an opera set on a British warship, some predicted failure because with no female characters the men's voices would be monotonous. Added to this is the irony that at the heart of *Billy Budd* is Billy's stammer, his inability to express himself verbally. Where opera relies on voice to reveal emotional intensity at key moments, the novel *Billy Budd* has silence at its center followed by explosive physical action. It is perhaps proof of the perfect matching of the novel to Britten's artistic temperament, however, that what might in other hands be liabilities are by him turned to success. Britten's writing for the all-male cast is extremely varied. Billy's part is composed for a

[5] Gary Schmidgall, *Literature as Opera* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 5.

[6] John Lazarus, *The Opera Handbook* (London: Longmans, 1987), 53.

baritone, Claggart's for a bass, and Vere's part was specifically written for the tenor voice of Britten's life-long companion and muse, Peter Pears. The orchestral music, relying on wind instruments, includes sea shanties and fanfares, at one point employing a mournful saxophone and at another a glittering piccolo.

The inspiration to use Melville's book as the source for an opera seems to have come from Britten's friend, the novelist E. M. Forster who co-wrote the libretto with Eric Crozier. *Billy Budd* appeared first in England and only later—almost five years later—after lavish praise by it's British admirers, was it published in New York. Forster was one of the first to recognize the novel's value. In his chapter entitled "Prophecy" in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) he discusses Melville, singling out *Billy Budd* for special attention. "It is to his conception of evil," Forster claims, "that Melville's work owes much of its strength." Here is a writer who "has not got that tiresome little receptacle, a conscience," who therefore can reach "straight back into the universal, to a blackness and sadness so transcending our own that they are indistinguishable from glory." *Billy Budd* is "a remote unearthly episode," he tells us, "but it is a song not without words."[7] When discussing his opera's origins Britten confessed, "I've often asked myself whether it was the passage in *Aspects of the Novel*... that reminded me of this extraordinary short story of Melville's."[8]

But if Forster suggested *Billy Budd*, what especially attracted Britten to Melville's novel? Looking over the composer's main stage works, *Peter Grimes*, *Billy Budd*, *The Turn of the Screw*, and *Death in Venice*, his four operas of lasting value, the theme of innocence versus experience in a more or less homosexual context stands out. In all of these older men become emotionally entangled with young males. Britten himself was strongly attracted to young boys and had several close relationships with them though none apparently ever went

[7] E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London: Edward Arnold, 1974), 97–98.

[8] John Colmer, *E. M. Forster, The Personal Voice* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 208.

beyond friendship.[9] In the case of Melville's *Billy Budd*, the homosexual elements are presented as innuendo about Billy's appeal as a handsome sailor. Melville, while not homosexual, was well aware of the temptations presented to sailors. Indeed in *White-Jacket* he refers to ships long at sea as "wooden-walled Gomorrahs of the deep."[10] Seen in this light, the struggle in *Billy Budd* can be read as a tragic homosexual love triangle. Claggart looks at Billy with "soft yearning" and "could even have loved Billy but for fate and ban" (88); Vere notes how Billy, "in the nude, might have posed for a statue of young Adam before the Fall," (94) and is full of "suppressed emotion" (106) during the deliberations of the drumhead court. Perhaps the most famous example of homoerotic symbolism in *Billy Budd* is the soup-spilling scene:

> [Billy] chanced in a sudden lurch to spill the entire contents of his soup pan on the new-scrubbed deck. Claggart... happened to be passing along... and the greasy liquid streamed just across his path. Stepping over it, he was proceeding on his way without comment... when he happened to observe who it was that had done the spilling. His countenance changed. Pausing, he was about to ejaculate something hasty at the sailor, but checked himself, and pointing down to the streaming soup, playfully tapped him from behind with his rattan, saying in a low musical voice peculiar to him at times, 'Handsomely done, my lad! And handsome is as handsome did it, too!' (72)

Here Claggart's twisted desire for Billy is barely restrained.

In Britten's opera the homoerotic coloring is altered but is just as prominent as in the original text. One reading of the opera concerns the futility of struggling against homosexual love. According to this interpretation, Vere upholds social order by not acknowledging his love for Billy, but is doomed to suffer a life of emotional anguish (as witnessed in the Prologue and Epilogue) for not following his heart.[11]

[9] Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten, A Biography* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992), 354–356.

[10] Herman Melville, *White-Jacket or, The World in a Man-of-War* (New York: Signet, 1980), 54.

[11] Carpenter interprets the opera as "an example of the kind of fiction to which Britten had been devoted;... the school story" (287–288), focusing on the physical and emotional relationships between young boys and their teachers at British public schools. See Carpenter, 287–290.

Forster apparently wanted a stronger homosexual element in the opera. In a letter urging Britten to develop the character of Claggart further, Forster argues, "I want *passion*—love constricted, perverted, poisoned, but nevertheless *flowing* down its agonizing channel; a sexual discharge gone evil. Not soggy depression or growling remorse."[12] Britten, however, resisted, even eliminating the soup-spilling episode from his opera, though transferring some of the language to another scene. In a 1979 interview, when Peter Pears was asked if Britten's opera would have been different if it had been written in the less socially constricted 70s he responded "I'm pretty sure that [Ben] wouldn't have wanted to be more explicit in any way. Melville himself was not explicit, either. He's very cagey, walking around the thing."[13]

In its basic outline Britten's *Billy Budd* is faithful to Melville's novel. The libretto even highlights a number of key phrases taken *verbatim* from the original source. Forster, in his seventies when Britten proposed the project, had great enthusiasm but felt insufficiently experienced in dramatic composition to handle the libretto alone. Crozier had worked with Britten on *Albert Herring* and joined the team in part because of his knowledge of the genre. "I was mostly responsible for the technical scenes and the dialogue," he wrote later, "Forster undertook what he called 'the big slabs of narrative.'"[14] With the exception of the sea shanties, which were written by Forster's friend, Kenneth Harrison, and a twenty-line excerpt taken directly from Melville's ballad, "Billy in the Darbies," the libretto is all in prose. Forster worried that this would inhibit the music, but Britten found the rhythms of Forster's sentences supple and melodic, close enough to verse to be satisfying.[15] Changes made in the story by the composer and librettists compress, simplify, and streamline the story.

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[12] Quoted in Mervyn Cooke and Phillip Reed, *Benjamin Britten: Billy Budd* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 27.

[13] Cooke and Reed, 167.

[14] Quoted in Carpenter, 282.

[15] Carpenter, 281.

A representative musical example of this occurs at the very beginning of the opera. Where Melville allows his theme to unfold gradually in the early chapters of the novel, in the opening bars of the opera the conflict between good and evil is immediately musically presented in a clash of chords harmonically distant from each other.

Compared to the characters in Melville's novel, those in the opera are relatively one-dimensional. While it is true that the nature of opera —its "operatic" emphasis on exaggeration—usually precludes subtle characterization, it should not necessarily require flattening literary figures into—to take a phrase from *Moby Dick*—pasteboard masks. Of the three main characters in Britten's work, Billy seems closest to Melville's original creation. His innocence, loyalty, and youthful enthusiasm are carried over and, if anything, expanded. Musically, some of the best pieces in the opera are Billy's. In Act I, after being assigned to the foretop, Billy exultantly sings out, "Thank you, sir. Foretopman! Thank you! Billy Budd, king of the birds! Billy Budd, king of the world!" Then turning seaward toward the departing *Rights of Man* he cries, "Farewell to you old comrades! Farewell to you forever! Farewell, *Rights o' Man.* Farewell, old *Rights o' Man.*"[16] The crew of the warship, catching the double meaning Billy is too innocent to understand, gather in expectation but the decks are immediately cleared by Claggart's men. The musical phrase accompanying Billy's farewell is brought back several times in the opera, always meaningfully, in the context of mutiny. In Melville's text Billy's parting words to his former ship are a single "Good-bye to you, too, old *Rights-of-Man*," shouted from the cutter out of earshot of the *Bellipotent's* sailors. This is instantly followed by the lieutenant roaring "'Down, sir'... though with difficulty repressing a smile" (49). Both scenes work, albeit in very different ways. In the opera it has a dramatic tension; in the novel it has an easy, ironic humor.

[16] Benjamin Britten, *Billy Budd*, conducted by the composer, with Peter Glossop, Peter Pears, and Michael Langdon, LSO, Decca Record Company, 417 428–2, 1968, 1969, 38–39. All references to the libretto are to the version accompanying the recorded opera. Page numbers are in parentheses.

Billy's most memorable scene, and one of the highlights of Britten's opera, has no parallel in the novel though the language is all Melville's. The night before the hanging Billy lies in irons below deck. In the novel he is visited by the chaplain who tries to explain to him the theological abstractions of salvation and the afterlife. Billy listens, "out of a certain natural politeness," (121) but has no use for the chaplain's words. In the opera, the chaplain's visit is discarded entirely and replaced by the "Billy in the Darbies" ballad sung by Billy. Moving the ballad from the end of the novel where—despite the fact that it was the initial spark for the story—it seems oddly tacked on, to a key scene in the opera where it is sung by Billy was a master-stroke. It is a private moment, the only time Billy appears alone, and the closing lines, "Roll me over fair.... I'm sleepy and the oozy weeds about me twist," (68) with the final word whispered, are full of dreamy lyricism all the more amazing coming from a man soon to be executed.

A scene which comes across less well in the opera is the climactic scene of Billy's hanging. In the novel this chapter is detailed and literary. "At the penultimate moment," the narrator tells us, Billy's only words are "God bless Captain Vere!" syllables delivered "in the clear melody of a singing bird on the point of launching from the twig." The response of the crew is immediate:

> Without volition, as it were, as if indeed the ship's populace were but the vehicles of some vocal current electric, with one voice from alow and aloft came a resonant sympathetic echo: 'God bless Captain Vere!'...
>
> At the pronounced words and the spontaneous echo that voluminously rebounded them, Captain Vere either through stoic self-control or a sort of momentary paralysis induced by emotional shock, stood erectly rigid as a musket in the ship-armorer's rack....
>
> At the same moment [as the silent signal given for the hanging] it chanced that the vapory fleece hanging low in the East was shot through with a soft glory as of the fleece of the Lamb of God seen in mystical vision, and simultaneously therewith, watched by the wedged mass of upturned faces, Billy ascended; and, ascending, took the full rose of the dawn. (123–124)

The focus on Vere's reaction to Billy's words underlines his responsibility for the execution. The simile used, comparing Vere's rigidity to

that of a musket in a ship-armorer's rack, suggests both the Captain's emotional paralysis and his role as enforcer of military law. The language and the event it describes become biblical at the moment of death. Immediately after the hanging there is a brief period of silence "emphasized by the regular wash of the sea against the hull or the fluttering of a sail." Melville often uses silence, peacefulness, or dumbness not only symbolically, but to heighten a dramatic effect. One thinks of "The Grand Armada" chapter in *Moby Dick* when the slaughter of whales is interrupted by a peaceful scene of whale cows with their calfs, and the end of the novel when Melville describes the "creamy pool" left after the sinking of the *Pequod* and the sharks gliding by Ishmael clinging to Queequeg's coffin "as if with padlocks on their mouths."[17] In *Billy Budd* the sudden quiet immediately after the hanging is followed by a sound the narrator says is not easily described:

> Whoever has heard the freshet-wave of a torrent suddenly swelled by pouring showers in tropical mountains, showers not shared by the plain; whoever has heard the first muffled murmur of its sloping advance through precipitous woods may form some conception of the sound now heard. The seeming remoteness of its source was because of its murmurous indistinctness, since it came from close by, even from the men massed on the ship's open deck. (126)

Before the murmur mounts to a chaotic flash-flood of anger, however, the watch is piped down by the silver whistles of the boatswain and his mates and order is restored.

In the opera the hanging scene begins with a formal reading of the charges against Billy and the verdict of the court. Billy then calls out his blessing to Captain Vere and it is echoed by the sailors. But instead of "God bless Captain Vere," Billy's words in the opera are changed to "Starry Vere, God Bless you" (69). While small, the change in what is probably the most famous phrase in the novel is significant. In the novel Billy addresses Vere in his official role as captain, supreme authority of the warship, who follows regulations however narrowly interpreted. In the opera Billy blesses Vere the "starry" dreamer, the man inside the uniform who is personally drawn to Billy. Setting aside

[17] *Moby Dick*, 386, 567.

musical considerations for why the change was made, the new wording suggests that the heart of the work is not moral, but profoundly psychological and emotional and that the bond between Billy and Vere goes far beyond mere naval protocol.

As in the novel, in the opera the crew reacts to Billy's blessing by repeating it, but unlike the novel, the opera skips over Captain Vere's reaction to the unexpected words. The stage directions at this point read, "The First Lieutenant closes his book. At this signal, the Marine sentries and Billy turn about and march off toward the main mast.... Captain Vere removes his hat. As he does so, all faces turn slowly upward to follow the body of Billy to the main-yard" (69). The hanging itself fails to match Melville's charged verbal description with a musical equivalent. The music traces Billy's ascent with horns and tambourine creating an almost Hitchcockian effect. The spiritual quality of Melville's description of Billy ascending against the prophetic glory of the dawn is simply not present. The brief human silence following the hanging, with the waves washing against the hull, is missing as well. Instead the unsettled murmuring of the men which Melville likens to a torrent roaring distantly through the woods begins almost immediately building to what the stage directions call "a capricious revulsion in the crew" (69). Finally, when the ship's officers order "Down all hands! And see that they go!" the crew disperses and the murmuring merges with the *Rights of Man* musical motif from Act I. Billy's hanging in the opera contains some effective elements, but the fast pace is unsatisfactory, and without the silences punctuating the action, it lacks the power and richness of the novel.

Claggart is especially disappointing in the opera. His opening lines in Act I accurately reveal his character. They are the same question, "Your name?" (36) sung as two rising notes, vaguely threatening like his raised rattan, repeated mechanically. In Act II Claggart has a soliloquy in which he swears to destroy Billy:

> O beauty, o handsomeness, goodness! Would that I ne'er encountered you! Would that I lived in my own world always, in that depravity to which I was born. There I found peace of a sort, there I established an order such as reigns in Hell. But alas,

alas! the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness comprehends it and suffers.
O beauty, o handsomeness, goodness! would that I'd never seen you!
Having seen you, what choice remains to me? None, none! I am doomed to annihailate you, I am vowed to your destruction....
I, John Claggart, Master-at-Arms upon the *Indomitable*, have you in my power, and I will destroy you. (49)

Forster wrote this section, calling it his "most important piece of writing" in the opera.[18] Unhappily it is simplistic, revealing Claggart as a type rather than a character. The book contains no oath to destroy Billy. At the outset of the description of Claggart in the novel, the narrator informs us, "his portrait I essay, but shall never hit it" (64). In the oath from the opera, however, we have little problem understanding the nature of Clagart's personality. And in case we do, Billy bluntly tells us: at the moment Billy strikes Claggart dead, he finally finds his tongue and blurts out, "...a...a...a DEVIL!" (64). Thus the complex figure of the master-at-arms in Melville's book is reduced to an almost cartoonish thinness in the opera.

In the novel when Billy mysteriously gets in trouble with Claggart's police for improperly stowing his bag, it is wise old Dansker who finally informs him, "'Jemmy Legs' (meaning the master-at-arms) 'is down on you'" (71). In the opera this line is dark and dramatic, but in fact there is no doubt as to the origin of Billy's troubles: early on we hear Claggart ordering Squeak to "tangle up his hammock, mess his kit, spill his grog, splash his soup, sneak about him" (40). Melville understood evil as few authors have. From *Typee* to *Billy Budd*, the nature of evil in the universe is one of Melville's great themes. For him it is a cosmic force driving a character, and not, as in Britten's opera, a depraved character allied with the devil or a devil in human form.

The most important difference between the novel and the opera, and one with far reaching consequences, occurs in the character of Captain Vere. During a radio broadcast in 1960 Britten talked about "making a new work" of *Billy Budd* and claimed it was "Vere, who has what seems to me the main moral problem of the whole work, round

[18] Quoted in Cooke and Reed, 61.

whom the drama was going to center.... I think it was the quality of conflict in Vere's mind... which attracted me to this particular subject."[19] Britten and his librettists all felt that Melville's Vere was too cold and unfeeling; they wanted to humanize him to reveal more of his personal concern for Billy. In order to do this they allowed Captain Vere to tell Melville's "inside narrative" as an old man looking back, remembering and reliving the tragic drama. The opera opens with Vere on stage alone, beginning his story in a prologue, then jumps back in time to the events covered in the novel, and finally closes with an epilogue sung by Vere alone again on stage. This departure from Melville's story is important for several reasons. First, by giving the narrative to one of the central figures as a flashback, it provides the audience with a clear view-point outside the sphere of immediate action. Where the narrator in the novel has a shadowy presence and the last three chapters introduce alternate interpretations of the story, Vere as the narrator in Britten's opera unifies and validates the action. Second, while Melville's *Billy Budd* is about the interaction of the three characters, Billy, Claggart, and Vere, by allowing Vere to narrate, the emphasis shifts to his character and puts it solidly at the center of the story, personalizing it and highlighting the inner turmoil he feels over his part in Billy's execution. Finally, framing the story in the memory of Captain Vere is a structural prop. Vere becomes an Ancient Mariner figure telling and retelling his tale to any audience willing to listen, purging himself of guilt. This is made explicit in the way the closing lines of the Epilogue end in ellipsis points which connect with the opening lines of the Prologue:

> I am an old man now, and my mind can go back in peace to that far-away summer of seventeen hundred and ninety-seven, long ago now, years ago, centuries ago, when I, Edward Fairfax Vere, commanded the *Indomitable*...
>
> —Epilogue (70)
>
> I am an old man who has experienced much. I have been a man of action and have fought for my King and country at sea.
>
> —Prologue (33)

[19] Quoted in Cooke and Reed, 29.

Thus the opera is given a kind of hermetic unity the novel intentionally avoids. The loose ends of Melville's text which many would say add to its interest are neatly tied up.

The unfortunate aspect of the attempt to humanize Vere is that his complexity in the novel becomes melodramatic handwringing in the opera. In Act II, after Billy strikes Claggart dead, Vere is distraught. He quickly examines the master-at-arms, sends Billy to wait in the adjoining stateroom, and summons his officers. In the minutes before they arrive he sings an agitated aria:

> The mists have cleared. O terror! what do I see? Scylla and Charybdis, the straits of Hell. I sight them too late—too late—I see all the mists concealed—all, all. Beauty, handsomeness, goodness coming to trial. How can I condemn him? How can I save him? How? How? My heart's broken, my life's broken. It is not his trial, it is mine, mine. It is I whom the devil awaits. (64)

Here Captain Vere's emotional turmoil bubbles over. The parallel between this soliloquy and Claggart's soliloquy quoted earlier is curious. Both men recognize Billy's "beauty, handsomeness, goodness" and both men, for different reasons, are bound to destroy Billy. At almost the same point in the novel the action is much more measured and Captain Vere is more decisive. After checking Claggart's condition,

> Captain Vere with one hand covering his face stood to all appearance as impassive as the object at his feet. Was he absorbed in taking in all the bearings of the event and what was best not only now at once to be done, but also in the sequel? Slowly he uncovered his face; and the effect was as if the moon emerging from eclipse should reappear with quite another aspect than that which had gone into hiding. The father in him, manifested towards Billy thus far in the scene, was replaced by the military disciplinarian. In his official tone he bade the foretopman retire to a stateroom aft (pointing it out) and there remain until thence summoned. (100)

Vere's mental control in the original is in stark contrast to his confusion in the opera. In the novel, after Claggart's body has been examined by the surgeon, but before the drumhead court is convened, Vere prematurely announces his verdict: "Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!" (101). There is no soul-searching or

questioning; Billy's fate is sealed.

Vere's final soliloquy in the opera, before delivering the guilty verdict to Billy, is another display of anguish:

> Cooped in this narrow cabin I have beheld the mystery of goodness—and I am afraid. Before what tribunal do I stand if I destroy goodness? The angel of God has struck and the angel must hang—through me. Beauty, handsomeness, goodness, it is for me to destroy you. I, Edward Fairfax Vere, Captain of the *Indomitable*, lost with all hands on the infinite sea. I am the messenger of death, the messenger of death! How can he pardon? How receive me? (67)

Again, the parallels with Claggart's soliloquy are striking and are even more pronounced here in the stating of his name and rank, emphasizing the futility of Vere's position. The answers to the rhetorical questions he asks are found in the orchestral music which follows. Vere has told his officers that he himself will notify Billy of the verdict. As the music builds he goes through the door to the inner cabin where Billy waits.

The scene which follows in *Billy Budd*, devoted to the interview between Billy and Captain Vere, is one of the strangest in the novel and one of the highlights of the opera. In the chapter from the novel Melville does not tell what happened, but what might have happened considering, as the narator says, "the character of the twain briefly closeted in that stateroom, each radically sharing in the rarer qualities of our nature—so rare indeed as to be all but incredible to average minds however much cultivated" (114–115). Most of the chapter is presented as the narrator's speculation, the only certainty being that Vere tells Billy he will be executed the following morning. As in the novel, in the opera the interview takes place behind a closed door. The stage is empty, Captain Vere's soul-searching gives way to orchestral majesty. Britten could have ended the scene with Vere's exit; instead, he composed a two-and-a-half minute arch of massive chords which musically "speak," describing the unwitnessed interview. Here Britten's language perfectly matches Melville's. The chords are heard almost as dialogue tracing the intense emotional development of the encounter. The mystical energy charging the relationship between

Billy and Captain Vere is simply but powerfully conveyed.

Giving the story to Captain Vere to tell reflects a much larger and more radical change that Britten, Forster, and Crozier made in translating *Billy Budd* from the page to the stage. Promoting Captain Vere to narrator requires saving him from death. In the novel Melville's Vere dies soon after Billy's hanging of wounds received battling a French warship symbolically named *Athée.* Britten's Vere is physically saved to tell the story in the opera, and he is also spiritually saved by Billy's death in order to sing of salvation. In the Epilogue Captain Vere sings the words that Melville never came close to writing:

> But he [Billy] has saved me, and blessed me, and the love that passeth understanding has come to me. I was lost on the infinite sea, but I've sighted a sail in the storm, the far-shining sail, and I'm content. I've seen where she's bound for. There's a land where she'll anchor for ever. (70)

The change removes all doubt. The ambiguous testament found in Melville's novel which has sparked so much critical debate is recast in Britten's opera into a resounding testament of faith. "The love that passeth understanding," brings the opera to a close with a reassuring biblical echo supported by an overwhelming intensity in the music.

Considering Britten's general lack of Christian fervor, the reason for the change probably has more to do with opera than with religion. By reworking Melville's *Billy Budd* into a clear testament of redemption, Britten transforms Captain Vere into a highly sympathetic character. What is lost in the nuance of prose is gained back in the immediate engagement of the theater audience. Melville's unfinished last novel tantalizes in a way that enriches, but to leave the central ambiguity intact would deny the high relief and escalation that is at the heart of opera.